

Five Reasons You Do Not Want to be Utah's Human Services Director



During this season of budget cuts and more budget cuts I thought some of our employees might wonder how it looks from the Director's seat. I regularly receive emails from employees sharing their frustration with the cuts, lack of pay, and my approach in general. I also hear from employees who are grateful and appreciative that DHS has maintained its equilibrium.

My job is tough, however, the toughest part is not the feedback, difficult decisions or the legislative session. When I took the job I figured it would be controversial and, at any one time, at least half the people would be upset. I also knew when I took the job that easier decisions would be made on a daily basis, while only the more complicated "exception" decisions would be mine. Lastly, I figured the legislative session would be like a giant jury trial every year for two months, and I knew how to argue for my cause from my past experience as an attorney.

We all have very tough parts to our job, and I thought I'd share some of mine - at least five reasons you do not want to be Human Services Director.

One: The Meals on Wheels van. It is parked in front of the DHS building every morning when I drive up. They are unloading meals so that our volunteer staff can deliver them to the homebound seniors in our neighborhood. When I see that van, I see the best of all worlds: a program that works and people that care about the program so much they will take time to put their money where their mouth is. As the Director, I see it and I worry. I wonder, have I protected this program enough? Have I given them enough support? What can I do today to make sure the van keeps coming?

Two: The ashes of Maria V. Every week or two I sit down and read the Fatality Reviews of clients who died while receiving our services. When it is a client of the Office of Public Guardian, it is a person who came to the end of a sad and lonely life. There was no one else to care for them or even visit this person - otherwise we wouldn't have been involved. When they die, it is usually the Guardian who gets called by the mortuary to pick up the ashes. What should DHS do with the ashes? Could we have done more for this person to build them a connection with

someone else? Was there really no one else? This is a question that haunts me.

Three: The voice of Taran. Taran is a little boy whose mom was addicted to Meth for 11 years. She got off Meth, and we put them both on an ad that is currently running on TV. Every time I see their commercial, I hear Taran talk about his mom. "She is a good person," he says and then he pauses. His voice changes, he smiles, and he says, "She is an amaaaazing person." Each time I can hear his voice change, and lift, and he is hopeful when he says that. Hopeful he has his mom back. So I ask myself - have we done enough to help his mom? Is she really back for good?

Four: The scrapbook that Disabilities caseworkers made for me when I started. Every page has a story about how disability services changed a person's life. The caseworker then tells how the change in the client's life also changed the caseworker's life. It is an interlocking web. The strong connection between caseworkers and their clients often makes it painful to read. They have worked with and supported the same families for many years - saving and enhancing lives every day. I can't help thinking - what if we have to cut these services? What will happen to these people? What will happen to their workers?

Five: The echo in the Capitol building. I spend a lot of time at the Capitol, meeting with legislators, advocates, county officials and the Governor's staff. It is a building with terrible acoustics. Sometimes when I am speaking, my voice just echoes off the marble walls and tile floors and gets lost. I try hard to say the right thing that will keep their interest and I try to think of angles no one else has thought of. Maybe I'll change someone's mind. But I wonder - if I could just sit down with them in a quiet room somewhere... would it be different? The Capitol is such a tough building in which to tell stories. DHS stories are often hard to hear, even in the best circumstances. Should I just keep talking?

Each day these and many other questions cross my mind and I am reminded of the difficult work you all do. It is the latter that keeps me coming back. You can either get discouraged or motivated by all this human misery. We all have tough jobs. Fortunately, for me and for Utah's most vulnerable citizens, you have chosen to work in a field that, despite the difficulty, truly impacts lives. As I continue to deal with budget cuts, your dedication to your work gives me the strength I need to advocate for our employees and clients.